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SUBJECT: RE-PUBLICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL DANISH CARTOON SPURS MUSLIM PROTESTS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Hundreds of Muslims angry over a newspaper's September 2 re-publication of the controversial Danish cartoon caricaturing the Prophet Mohammed demonstrated in several locations

in the South Indian state Tamil Nadu. In Vellore, approximately 145 kilometers from Chennai, demonstrators threw stones at the offices of the newspaper as well as government-owned buses on the Chennai-Bangalore highway. The authorities said one police officer was injured in the violence; several dozen protestors were arrested.

The police also arrested the newspaper's graphic designer and the newspaper issued a front page apology on September 5. Despite the apology, government officials expect the demonstrations to continue, albeit on a low key. The protests demonstrate the continued sensitivity of Indian Muslims to the Danish cartoon. End Summary.

Angry Demonstrators Attack Newspaper Office, Buses

¶2. (SBU) On September 2, the Vellore edition of the Tamil-language newspaper "Dina Malar" pulled off the internet and re-published the controversial Danish cartoon caricature of Islam's Prophet that caused worldwide protests in 2006. Later that day hundreds of angry Muslim demonstrators gathered and threw stones at the newspaper's Vellore office. (Note: There were no local protests in 2006 when the cartoon was originally published in Denmark. End note.) The protestors also blocked the Bangalore-Chennai road, stalling traffic for several hours. A police officer was injured in the stone-throwing, and the police used riot-control canes to disperse the protestors. The police arrested the newspaper's graphics designer for "hurting religious sentiments," as well as several dozen of the demonstrators for engaging in violence. Less violent protests, continued on September 3 and 4 in locations throughout Tamil Nadu.

Low-Key Demonstrations Likely to Continue

¶3. (SBU) A senior government official told post that he expects low-key protests to continue for some more time. "The Muslim groups will tend to use the opportunity to mobilize their ranks in view of the upcoming elections," he said. But he does not expect major violence associated with the continued protests. He added that the police and Vellore district authorities acted quickly to bring the situation under control.

Media Dirty Tricks Fuel Muslim Anger

¶4. (SBU) A journalist told post that competition between two media organizations helped to fuel Muslim anger. He said the powerful Dinakaran-Sun TV group exaggerated the scale of the protests in an effort to prompt a more vitriolic Muslim response, with an eye toward embarrassing its rival Dina Malar, which carried the cartoons. The fact that a Hindu Brahmin owns Dina Malar probably further heightened Muslim outrage at the newspaper's action.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: Tamil Nadu has a reputation for generally peaceful Hindu-Muslim relations, and Vellore with its large Muslim minority has seen no communal violence despite periodic moments of

tension, especially surrounding the anniversary of the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. Although the protests were exacerbated by the fact that Dina Malar is Hindu-owned and by its rival's effort to stoke the fire, the fact is that the protests began as a spontaneous eruption of Muslim anger at the re-publication of the controversial cartoon. It is telling that, even in an otherwise relatively prosperous and peaceful corner of India, Muslim anger against the inflammatory Danish cartoon persists. End comment.

¶6. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi.
Simkin